The Sām- Ūpmā Mundhum Philosophy: An Indigenous Framework for Mental Well-being and Decolonial Thought.

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Abstract

Emerging from the traditional knowledge system of the Kirat Limbu people of Nepal is the Sām-Ūpmā Mundhum philosophy. Combining the ideas of soul (sām), the practice of soul-calling (Ūpmā), and oral tradition (mundhum) into a philosophical framework of healing, balance, and well-being, this holistic perspective offers This book presents a formal academic framework for this indigenous philosophy together with its ontological, epistemological, and therapeutic bases. Sām-Ūpmā offers a new way to understand mental health and human awareness that is connected to spirituality and culture, serving as an alternative to traditional psychiatric methods.

An Introduction

Deeply ingrained, culturally relevant models of understanding human well-being, sickness, and healing abound from indigenous philosophies all around. Within the framework of Nepal's ethnic and cultural variety, the belief system of the Kirat Limbu people stands as a deep indigenous philosophy combining ecological, social, and spiritual aspects. Proposing an indigenous paradigm built on oral traditions, ritual practices, and a worldview centred on the soul (sām) and its relationship to nature, ancestors, and community, the "Sām-Ūpmā Mundhum Philosophy" stands out as a singular contribution to the worldwide conversation on mental health.

The Sām-Ūpmā Mundhum Philosophy is presented here as a formal academic framework with ramifications for alternative

mental health paradigms, decolonial research, and indigenous psychology. Arguing for its role in world debates on human awareness, healing, and epistemic fairness, the study covers the ontological, epistemological, and therapeutic bases of this indigenous system.

Review of Literature

Particularly concentrated in eastern Nepal, the Kirat Limbu people are among the oldest indigenous populations in the Himalayan region. Their oral traditions, cosmology, and spiritual practices are captured in what is known as Mundhum, a corpus of oral scripture delivering ethical, cosmological, and therapeutic lessons (Chemjong, 2003). Within this worldview, sām—that is, soul or living essence—has a key importance. Illness, particularly psychological or spiritual suffering, is thought to result from the dislocation or loss of the sām, which is rebuilt by the Ūpmā—a soul-calling process carried out by traditional healers known as samba or phedangma.

Physical, emotional, spiritual, and communal well-being are not distinguished in the Kirat Limbu tradition. Rather, it finds these fields to be linked and mutually constitutive. The loss of sām influences the environment, the person, and the society at once. Healing is therefore relational and group; calling back the soul is also a ritual of reintegration and balance.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Mental Health

A lot of research exists that questions the universality of Western psychiatric paradigms and advocates including indigenous knowledge systems in mental health research and treatment (Gone, 2013; Smith, 2012). Emphasizing balance,

connectivity, and oral knowledge transmission (Kirmayer et al., 2014), indigenous healing traditions can see sickness through a spiritual or community lens.

Epistemic Justice in Decolonial Theory

Decolonial theory offers a critical prism through which one could view how colonial histories and power systems have influenced knowledge creation (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Decolonial theory is based mostly on the concept of "epistemic disobedience," or the refusal to accept Western knowledge as the only appropriate framework. Indigenous philosophies such as Sām-Ūpmā, in this perspective, are not "alternative but rather parallel and valid systems of though".

Indigenous Contexts from Nepal

Though certain anthropologists and cultural historians have recorded ceremonial activities and oral histories, there has been little scholarly research on the Limbu Mundhum tradition in Nepal (Sagant, 1996; Subba, 1999). Few attempts, in the meantime, have been undertaken to formalise these customs into philosophical or psychological models fit for interacting with world events.

Theoretical Rationale

Many times anchored in Eurocentric paradigms that favour individualism, rationalism, and biomedical forms of therapy, modern psychology and psychiatry are Particularly those including oral traditions, communal rituals, and cosmological beliefs, these paradigms tend to marginalize or pathologize indigenous and spiritual viewpoints (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

Growing awareness of the necessity to decolonize mental health and investigate alternative models reflecting the epistemologies and lived reality of indigenous people has come in recent years. The Sām-Ūpmā Mundhum Philosophy offers a comprehensive, context-specific framework that not only questions received wisdom but also offers fresh insights into human suffering, identity, and healing. Academic documentation and analysis of this concept help to preserve indigenous knowledge and include it in international health debates.

Methodology

This study is grounded in a qualitative, interpretive approach integrating philosophical analysis, indigenous research methods, and ethnographic reflection. One applied the following techniques:

The author sought oral testimonies from traditional healers, guardians of the Mundhum tradition, and community elders. Particularly recognised for symbolic and therapeutic aspects were ritual observations, including soul-calling rites (Ūpmā).

Reviewing secondary sources, including anthropological writings, spiritual songs, and current Mundhum documents, helped one to find basic themes and philosophical frameworks.

As a cultural insider and researcher, the author combined personal experience and contemplation as a methodological tool in line with indigenous research ideas (Kovach, 2009).

4. Theoretical Model: Decolonial philosophy, indigenous psychology, and critical ethnography help the study to place Sām-Ūpmā as a genuine knowledge system.

Ontological observations

The Sām-Ūpmā paradigm holds a relational ontology whereby identity is intertwined with community and cosmos. This questions Cartesian dualism and fits Andean Ayllu and African Ubuntu ideas (Walsh, 2018). Soul is not a metaphor; it is lived and experienced via emotionality, ceremony, and relationality.

The Epistemology of Experience

Knowledge is embodied and ritualised, not abstract or written. Mundhum recitations co-create information in real time between the speaker, listener, and surroundings. This supports Kovach's (2009) contention that indigenous knowledge is contextual, relational, and experienced.

Therapeutic Structured Approach

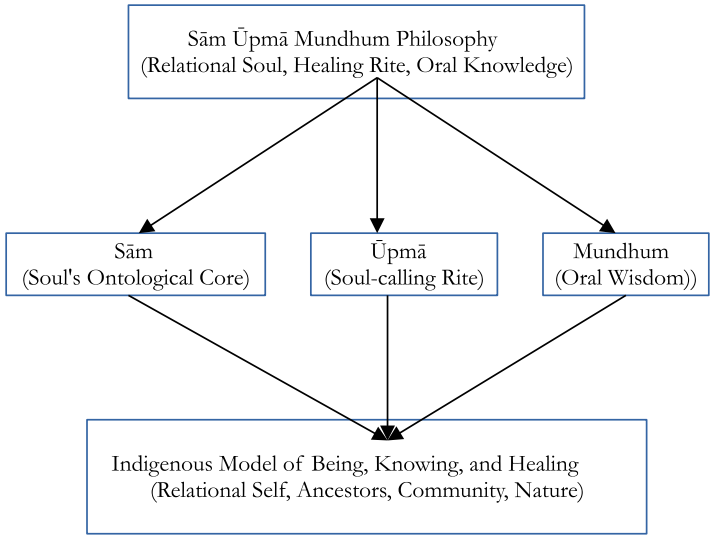
Reintegration takes centre stage in the therapeutic model rather than correction. Unlike biological psychiatry, which addresses symptoms separately, **Ūpmā** helps the person to regain coherence in their story and links them with their source. It functions as psychological as well as spiritual healing.

Decolonial Relevance:

Sām-Ūpmā disturbs the epistemological hierarchy that favours written, secular, and scientific knowledge by claiming the legitimacy of spiritual and oral knowledge. It reflects the decolonial demand to "think from the South" and reframes worldwide conceptions of health and consciousness (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Development and Presentation of the theory

Theoretical Framework of Sām Ūpmā Mundhum Philosophy



The Sām-Ūpmā Mundhum has three main pillars that define philosophy:

The essence of life and consciousness; its presence preserves equilibrium inside the self and the environment.

Conducted by chants, offerings, and community involvement, the ceremonial act of restoring the soul is known as Ūpmā—calling the soul.

Mundhum, or oral wisdom, is the story and ritual process used to pass on knowledge.

These components, taken together, build a whole model of being, knowing, and healing. Under this perspective, the self

is a node in a web of relationships—with ancestors, land, community, and spirit—not an isolated person.

Together, these pillars—Sām (the soul), Ūpmā (the soul-calling rite), and Mundhum (the oral tradition or spiritual knowledge system)—establish a whole indigenous framework with philosophical and therapeutic relevance. This part explores these pillars in great detail to show how they combine metaphysical belief with mental and spiritual healing, therefore presenting the philosophy as a whole, culturally anchored paradigm (Subba, 1999; Sagant, 1996).

1. Sām: Soul's Ontological Core

At the heart of the Sām-Ūpmā system is the idea of Sām. It relates the human being to the universe and speaks of the soul, essence, or vital energy animating it. Known through experience and manifested through emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being, the Sām is an existential reality rather than a theological abstraction (Gone, 2013).

From the Kirat Limbu perspective, the Sām is inseparable from the ego. Personhood, consciousness, and relationality are granted by its core. The Sām's loss or weakening is thought to cause emotional instability, mental disorientation, depression, or physical frailty. Thus, one's health and sense of wholeness closely relate to one's soul state (Kirmayer et al., 2014).

A relational soul is also the Self. It exists not apart but rather inside one's family, ancestors, area, and community. Its dislocation is a societal imbalance as much as a personal tragedy. Often, loss of soul comes from trauma, grief, or spiritual disconnection—conditions sometimes overlooked or

pathologized in Western psychiatry. By contrast, the Sām-Ūpmā framework identifies identical symptoms as markers of spiritual rupture and calls for community and ceremonial attention to reunite the ego with its relational web (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

2. Ūpmā: Order of Repair—calling the soul

Ūpmā is the healing ceremony whereby the lost soul returns to the body. Traditionally, shamans known as Samba or Phedangba/ma—who are ceremonial experts with a strong awareness of the mundhum—are involved (Sagant, 1996). Throughout the ceremony, chants, drumming, and symbolic offerings help to follow the soul's road and call it back.

The event is an ontological act rather than merely a symbolic performance. Using Ūpmā, the society acknowledges the metaphysical source of suffering and assigns guilt for rehabilitation. Apart from the healer and the patient, the process often involves family members, old persons, and natural elements like water, fire, and earth, which are meant to assist in the soul's return (Chemjong, 2003).

This rite signals a significant departure from Western therapeutic concepts. Ūpmā heals by restoring links between the person and their ancestors, their natural surroundings, and their own inner harmony rather than focusing solely on the person's thoughts or actions (Kirmayer et al., 2014). Healing re-sacralizes by including mystery, respect, and community back into the process.

Ūpmā also serves narratively, crucially. The healer chants the mundhum, therefore orienting the suffering in a larger cosmological narrative. Their suffering is not arbitrary or

meaningless; it is rather a road towards recovery shared by all. Although this approach is conceptually related to story therapy (Kovach, 2009), it is loaded with metaphysical and cultural symbolism unique to the Kirat Limbu perspective.

3. Mundhum—Oral Wisdom—the Epistemological Base

Mundhum, bearing the accumulated spiritual, intellectual, and ethical knowledge, is the oral tradition of the Limbu people. It addresses cosmology, lineages, myths, rites, and moral teachings. Presented over decades by oral custodians, mundhum is both scripture and story, law and teaching, and cosmology and consciousness (Chemjong, 2003).

Mundhum presents a non-linear, performative, and experiential style of knowing as an epistemological foundation. Mundhum knowledge is confirmed by ritual participation, corporeal practice, and communal resonance, unlike Western philosophical systems anchored in textual rationalism. It is experienced, not just read; performed, not just preserved (Smith, 2012).

Mundhum is the governing principle in the Sām-Ūpmā framework that shapes Sām's knowledge as well as Ūpmā's application. It offers the story logic via which sickness is understood, meaning is created, and healing is carried out. Specific mundhum stories, for instance, can be called upon during an Ūpmā ritual to treat specific symptoms or traumas, therefore orienting the patient's experience within a culturally relevant framework (Kovach, 2009).

Mundhum also has dialogical flexibility. It changes with each performance to allow for contextualisation and innovation. This versatility makes it particularly strong as a living

philosophy—one that preserves legacy while reacting to modern requirements (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

Three Pillars Integration

What determines the Sām-Ūpmā? A profound philosophy is not only the presence of these three elements but also their interaction. Sām outlines what it means to be human; Ūpmā acts to restore wholeness; and Mundhum clarifies why this process is important. Working together, the three pillars create an indigenous environment of mind and spirit (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

This integration is also instructive. Through repeated rites and collective storytelling, the children acquire knowledge about their soul's significance, the means of healing, and the obligations of communal existence. Elders teach by modelling these rites and stories in addition to giving instructions. Consequently, the Sām-Ūpmā framework serves as a complete education system covering spiritual, psychological, ecological, and ethical aspects (Kovach, 2009).

In mental health work, this tripartite framework provides fresh ideas for diagnosis, therapy, and treatment planning. It pulls spiritual, emotional, and community elements together into a coherent system instead of isolating them. For someone going through bereavement or anxiety, for example, cognitive restructuring is only one tool; another is a ritual space to help them heal their soul, hear their cultural memories, and re-establish their community membership (Gone, 2013).

By claiming that oral knowledge, ritual experience, and indigenous spirituality are not less than complete and

coherent systems in their own right, the Sām-Ūpmā paradigm also supports decolonial approaches to psychology. These systems question the idea that valid healing must be scientific, secular, or clinical (Smith, 2012).

Contemporary Relevance and Applications

The Sām-Ūpmā Mundhum Philosophy provides a much-needed paradigm for reevaluating well-being in a society more and more split by modernity, climate change, and social fragmentation. Especially in communities looking for culturally responsive treatment, its emphasis on relational identity, ritual healing, and ecological interconnectedness can guide worldwide mental health practices (Kirmayer et al., 2014).

Beyond the Limbu community, the ideas ingrained in this framework—such as the sacredness of life energy, the worth of ancestral memory, and the power of ritual—can motivate more general changes in how society views pain and fosters healing.

Establishing the Sām-Ūpmā framework in academic, therapeutic, or cultural events would call for respect of oral tradition, openness to non-Western epistemologies, and cooperation with indigenous knowledge bearers. However, such integration enhances the human perspective of health, purpose, and connectedness as well as diversifies the intellectual terrain (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Ultimately, the Sām-Ūpmā Mundhum philosophy transcends mere cultural artefact. It is a live, active system with philosophical depth and useful application. This part has shown how the theory articulates a strong vision of human

flourishing anchored in indigenous wisdom and applicable for a fractured modern society by elaborating its three basic pillars: sām, Ūpmā, and mundhum.

Conclusion and Reflections

Originating in the Kirat Limbu tradition of Nepal, the Sām-Ūpmā Mundhum Philosophy offers a rich, indigenous framework of healing and consciousness. Its focus on the soul, ritual, and oral tradition presents a potent substitute for accepted mental health models. By means of a relational ontology, embodied epistemology, and spiritually grounded therapy, it not only questions but also broadens the field of psychological and philosophical inquiry.

This work adds to decolonial philosophy, indigenous scholarship, and the worldwide struggle towards epistemic justice. The wisdom ingrained in Sām-Ūpmā challenges us to rethink healing — not as a professional solution but as a holy act of reconnection at a time when mental suffering is pervasive and societal disengagement is profound.

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